Jon Hall and Subjective Wellbeing part 1 - full post

Posted on 7 October 2011

I'm not sure how it is in other agencies but luckily in the ABS we have the opportunity to attend some very interesting seminar. Recently, we attended a seminar on Subjective Wellbeing by Jon Hall. This is a growing area and personally I find it one of the more interesting and engaging areas when looking at societal progress. Jon was leading the OECD's Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies since it began in 2005. Recently, he returned to work at the ABS.

I'm going to go through what Jon said in his presentation as it was very interesting.

Basically, Jon said subjective wellbeing is about how individuals rate the quality of their life. It is sometimes referred to happiness as well. He spoke of two broad ways of measuring subjective wellbeing.

1- Ask people about their life satisfaction, or the quality of their life.

2- Ask people how they are feeling doing certain activities. For example, how you feel while at work, or spending time with your children or commuting.

While these two different types of questions look very similar, they can result in different answers. Asking someone "How satisfied are you with your life?" is much more influenced by life circumstances than our day to day emotions. For example, people are 'happier' on weekends but no more satisfied with life overall.

Jon also said that there is a difference between in how people feel while they are doing something compared with how they remember it. If you ask someone how they are feeling while spending time with their kids, you can get a difference answer to how they remember it. Just think about it, if you are spending time with your kids, you can be flustered, overwhelmed, or annoyed even. But when you look back at that time, most people can find it the most rewarding thing they can do, even if they were overwhelmed. How we remember a situation can be different to how we felt during it. So when we're looking at subjective wellbeing we need to be aware of the different responses we may get depending on when and the types of questions we ask.

In the next couple of posts, we'll go through other parts of Jon's presentation on subjective wellbeing.

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Return to Home

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#1 DavidM

12/10/2011 2:33:31 PM Jon Hall and Subjective Wellbeing part 1 - full post

The way I think of it is as a contentment model. Contentment is the 0 on a vector graph of our emotional and mental energy and processes. If we have positive input we feel 1+ or more until we process it and it slowly lowers to 0, if we are taxed by a distressing event or continual drain on our energy we feel 1- or more in that direction. This can be directly correlated with peoples satisfaction levels, if they have small debits and credits then life is generally around 0 and ok, if it is in the negetive much of the time then life is not so good and could certainly be better. and of course if it is in the positive a fair amouint of time then life is great and we are very happy. Any change in levels will either return over time to zero or we adjust to the new levels setting to 0 the central level we have arrived at.

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August 2011 (6)

July 2011 (1)

April 2011 (3)

Ask us how we are and we sum up the + & - to see where the value has generally been over the recent past and then vwe answer - not too bad thanks.

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